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Final Report

Project Title:

Alternative Transportation Options, Well-Being & Livable Communities

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Project Description

Transportation is critical to everyday activities and is also the underpinning of well-being. Well-being—often related to happiness—can be defined in many ways and while ‘happiness’ is often considered an important element of well-being, it is only one. This research examined subjective well-being or SWB in several dimensions: physical well-being, emotional well-being, access to services, work environment, life evaluation and healthy behaviors. How does transportation and selected community design elements affect well-being, especially among disadvantaged populations such as the elderly. This project queried the Gallup-Healthways Well-being Index, a survey of 1000 Americans everyday over an ongoing 25 year period, to identify the possible impact of transportation and community on SWB, e.g., walkability, access to parks, public transportation options, etc. Several questions were addressed:

- How does transportation and area type-related variables impact SWB? For example, does your commute time affect SWB?
- Do high alternative transportation service levels improve SWB?
- Does where you live, e.g. city, rural or area type affect SWB?

Method

This research based its findings and analysis on survey responses to the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index. As reported by the Gallup and Healthways, this survey is the most extensive of its kind: the Index tracks the SWB of U.S. residents throughout the year. At the time of this study the Index represented the completed surveys of 1000 U.S. adults nationwide each day, except on major holidays. Interviews are conducted with respondents on landline telephones and cellular phones, with interviews conducted in English and Spanish.

A minimum quota of 150 cell phone respondents and 850 landline respondents are contacted each day. Landline respondents are chosen at random within each household on the basis of which member had the most recent birthday. Samples are weighted by gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education, region, adults in the household, cell-phone-only status, cell-phone-mostly status, and phone lines. Demographic weighting targets are based on the March 2009 Current Population Survey figures for the aged 18 and older non-institutionalized population living in U.S. telephone households. All reported margins of sampling error include the computed design effects for weighting and sample design.

With the inclusion of the cell-phone-only households and the Spanish Language interviews, 98% of the adult population is represented in the sample. By comparison, typical landline-only methodologies represent approximately 85% of the adult population.

Findings

The analysis of the Gallup-Healthways survey data provided a variety of findings as well as new research questions. These include:

- How does SWB vary by area type? For example, New England generally has high rural and suburban SWB rankings but very low urban rankings when compared to other census regions.
- Do cities with high walkability report higher SWB? The top 10 cities are the cities with the ten highest combinations of Walk Scores, Transit Scores, and Bike Scores. Results are somewhat mixed. When looking at just the Top 10 cities and their suburbs and aggregating by area type, suburbs have higher SWB scores but urban respondents suggest that they are likely to be happier than suburban residents in the future.
- Do cities with high alternative transportation service levels have higher SWB? The average SWB scores are approximately the same for Top 10 cities and non-Top 10 cities, suggesting that high alternative transportation service levels are not a major factor in distinguishing the happiness of people living in cities from other cities.
- Where do people feel safe walking at night? Paralleling the geographic distribution of SWB results, where people in the southeast quadrant of the country have the lowest average SWB scores, the same area also feels the least safe to people walking around their neighborhood alone at night. Distance to amenities is certainly important, but people also need to feel safe walking to those amenities.
- Does your commute affect your SWB? Commute time is a significant factor in SWB and impacts well-being negatively.

Conclusions

SWB provides a useful lens to assess both investments and operations of public infrastructure. Transportation's unique role in connecting all of life's activities may benefit from greater research into SWB and its relationship to future planning alternatives.

Outputs

- Transportation Research Board (paper), Travel Time & Subjective Well-Being, January 2013
- SM, Transportation Thesis, Civil & Environmental Planning, Janet Choi, August 2013